



Attitudes of Secondary Education Master's Students Toward Disability

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This study examined the attitudes of future secondary education teachers toward people with disabilities, with attention to the role of comfort, reasons for contact, and perceived information. Method: a descriptive, cross-sectional, correlational design was employed. Participants were 251 students enrolled in a Master's in Secondary Education program in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain (53.8% women; mean age = 27.8 years). Attitudes were measured using the Attitudes toward People with Disabilities Scale, along with items assessing comfort, type of contact, and level of perceived information. Data were analysed using t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlations, and linear regression, with adjustments for age and gender. Results: Greater comfort with disability was consistently associated with more positive attitudes across dimensions of social relationships, normalized life, and intervention programs ($p < .01$). Regression analysis indicated that comfort significantly predicted a proactive attitude toward disability ($\beta = .091$, $p = .002$), whereas contact and perceived information were weaker predictors when controlling for demographic factors. Age showed some association, with students over 27 displaying more favourable attitudes, while gender differences were not significant. Findings suggest that comfort with disability is a stronger correlate of positive attitudes than contact or perceived information among prospective teachers. While the correlational design precludes causal claims, the results highlight the importance of addressing affective dispositions in teacher training programs and the need for longitudinal research to clarify developmental pathways.

Keywords: comfort, disability, teacher professional development, students, secondary education

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INTRODUCTION

In a democratic paradigm, education must move beyond deficit perspectives that portray systems as inherently lacking in training, organization, and resources. Instead, the focus should be on building equitable opportunities that ensure the well-being of all learners, regardless of modality or circumstance (Huete-García, Otaola & Gómez, 2019). Achieving inclusive education requires concrete changes in teacher preparation, so that future professionals can identify and minimize physical, personal, and institutional barriers to participation (Sisto et al., 2021). This involves not only transmitting inclusive values but ensuring that teachers actively implement the right of all children and young people to quality and lifelong education (Acuña et al., 2017).

International frameworks emphasize these principles, highlighting that education must be accessible, acceptable, and adaptable to diverse social contexts. However, translating rights into practice remains inconsistent. In Spain, despite supportive legislation, progress has been limited since 2008, reflecting the persistent gap between policy discourse and classroom realities. Teachers continue to experience crises of preparedness, often reporting uncertainty when responding to disability due to limited training, scarce resources, and fragmented policy guidance (Corral, 2019; Díaz & Caballero, 2014; Lacoboni & Moirano, 2018; Verdugo et al., 2018).

The Master's in Secondary Education (MUFPS) program is therefore pivotal in shaping inclusive dispositions among future teachers. Research points to three interrelated factors influencing attitudes toward disability: comfort, contact, and information. Comfort refers to the degree of ease or unease teachers feel when interacting with people with disabilities. This affective dimension may reduce anxiety and facilitate openness to inclusive practices. Scholars argue that fostering comfort is essential for moving beyond neoliberal or exclusionary paradigms (Candela & Benavides, 2020), yet empirical research has rarely examined its role directly. Contact has also been studied as a predictor of attitudes, with evidence suggesting that family or professional experiences can strengthen social relationships with people with disabilities (Mayo, Fernández & Roget, 2020; Macías, 2021). Still, the benefits of contact are not uniform: improvements in interpersonal comfort do not always extend to support for normalization or intervention programs, suggesting that not all contact is equally meaningful. Information, in turn, can increase knowledge and challenge stereotypes (Rello, Garoz & Díaz, 2014; Corral, 2019). Yet studies caution that information alone, when fragmented or superficial, does little to transform deeper beliefs or behaviors (Lacoboni & Moirano, 2018).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while comfort, contact, and information are all relevant, their relative impact remains poorly understood, particularly in teacher training contexts. Furthermore, advocacy for inclusion often assumes their effects without examining how they interact with structural conditions such as inadequate resources or limited institutional support. Early interventions in teacher education are therefore critical. Structured programs can foster attitudinal change, encourage democratic dispositions, and prepare teachers to embrace diversity proactively (Bedor, 2018; Quevedo, Pazmiño & San Andrés, 2020). Approaches such as the co-subject

model, based on reciprocal and activity-driven learning, highlight the potential for collaborative practices that build bridges with families and communities (Del Valle & Rodríguez, 2017; Valladares et al., 2020; Macías, 2021).

A related dimension is teacher self-efficacy. Evidence shows that developing self-efficacy early in training enhances inclusive dispositions, improves well-being, and supports equity in practice (Van Dinther et al., 2013; Collado-Sanchis et al., 2020; Murillo et al., 2020; Shoji et al., 2016; Zee & Koomen, 2016). These processes depend on both affective-motivational factors and pedagogical skills (De Coninck et al., 2020; Guerriero, 2017) and appear largely independent of demographic characteristics such as gender and age (Navarro-Patón, Pereira & Rodríguez-Fernández, 2020; Bermúdez & Navarrete, 2020). This challenges assumptions that inclusive dispositions are naturally acquired over time, underscoring the role of intentional training design.

The present study investigates the attitudes of MUFPS students toward people with disabilities, focusing on feelings of comfort, reasons for contact, and perceived information following specific activities for diversity (SAD). By clarifying the relative weight of these factors, the study seeks to move beyond rhetorical claims and provide evidence to inform professional development strategies that genuinely support inclusive education.

METHOD

A descriptive, quantitative, correlational and *ex post facto* cross-sectional study is presented (Montero & León, 2007).

Participants

A total of 251 students from the MUFPS of Castilla-La Mancha took part: 135 women (53.8%) and 116 men (46.2%). The students were aged between 21 and 57 years (mean \pm SD: 27.82 ± 5.877) and were divided into two groups: G1 (up to 27 years old: 95 women (37.8%) and 59 men (23.5%) with an average age of 24.27 years (± 1.750)) and G2 (over 27 years old: 40 women (15.9%) and 57 men (22.7%) with an average age of 33.46 years (± 5.717)) (see Table 1). Sampling was non-probabilistic and non-random, selected by convenience (access to the sample). All four of the university's campuses were selected. Participants were informed of the study protocol and informed consent was requested. The inclusion criterion was taking the MUFPS during the 20/21 academic year (80% face-to-face classes; Order ECI/3858/2007), and the exclusion criterion did not sign the informed consent form and/or not taking the MUFPS face-to-face.

Table 1
Distribution of frequencies (and percentages) considering sex and age

	Age		Total
	G1. Up to 27 years	G2. Over 27 years	
Women	95 (37,8)	40 (15,9)	135 (53,8)
Men	59 (23,5)	57 (22,7)	116 (46,2)
Total	154 (61,4)	97 (38,6)	251 (100)

Variables and Instrument

The Attitude Scale towards People with Disabilities (Arias et al., 2016) was used to assess perceptions of attitudes towards disability. The instrument consists of 31 items out of the initial 34. Items 4, 12 and 17 were discarded and the remaining items are grouped into three subscales. Each subscale refers to a dimension of disability.

Table 2

Subscales

Social and personal relationships with people with disabilities (SR). Refers to the person's feelings and behavioral intentions when forming personal or social relationships with people with disabilities.	Normalized Life (NL). Measures the rights of people with disabilities to lead a normal life and to have equal opportunities to develop in all areas of life	Intervention Programs (IP). Measures specific actions to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities
Items 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 18, 19, 21, 24, 25, 28, 31, 32	Items 1, 2, 3, 8, 11, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 27, 29, 30	Items 5, 6, 26, 33, 34

The overall scale score is obtained by taking the average of each sub-scale. The higher the score, the more positive the attitude towards disability. A Likert-type scale was used, where: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly agree. The estimated response time was 10–15 minutes in total. The scale has the following values: CFI = .69, TLI = .77, RMSEA = -.017, and reliability = .913 (RS), .885 (VN), and .730 (PI). The ordinal ω for each dimension is $\omega=.93$ (RS), $\omega=.91$ (VN) and $\omega=.79$ (PI), which is very adequate (George & Mallery, 2003). The scale also estimates a series of variables relating to respondents' socio-demographic information, such as gender, age, campus of study, and major studied, as well as their feelings of comfort or discomfort with people with disabilities, the reason for contact, and their perception of how well or poorly informed they are about disability. These values range from 1 to 6.

Procedure

The study was carried out during the 2020/21 academic year. According to educational legislation, students in the Common and Specific Modules received information on students with disabilities. Different types of SAD activities were designed and implemented to encourage reflection on reasons for contact and to generate feelings of comfort and well-informed Ness. The activities were intended to establish future social relationships, favor a normalized life, carry out intervention programs and encourage a positive attitude towards students with disabilities. The activities were based on meaningful, reciprocal learning that does not distinguish between students and emphasizes the notions of complementarity and coexistence, which are important aspects of the development of their future teaching profession.

The team consisted of a principal investigator and three collaborating doctoral researchers (MUFPS teachers). This team administered the test to MUFPS students via email during the last two weeks of May 2021, after they had completed all the subjects

of the Master's degree. It was completed in a single session with no time limit. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were informed of the study's objectives, its voluntary nature and its compliance with ethical standards, including those recognised by the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision), the Good Clinical Practice recommendations of the EEC (document 111/3976/88 of July 1990) and current Spanish legal regulations governing clinical research on humans.

Statistical analysis

SPSS v.28 and RStudio were used. As the sample met the normality assumption, a parametric analysis was applied (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2018). A differential analysis was carried out using the Student t-test for the variable age, which was recorded into two groups according to the average age of the student body (27 years): G1 and G2. Up to 27 years and G2: Over 27 years). This was also done for the variables feeling of comfort with disability, reason for contact and perception of the information received, as well as for the differential analysis according to gender (males vs. females). We also considered the effect size of the obtained differences using Cohen's d, for which a small effect is estimated at 0.20, a medium effect at 0.50, and a large effect at 0.80. An ANOVA analysis was also used to analyze the mean values of each subscale and the overall scale of the questionnaire in relation to the variables measuring comfort. The effect size was calculated using χ^2 (0.01 = small, 0.06 = medium, and 0.14 = large effect) (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2018). Inferential analysis was carried out using Pearson's correlation analysis, adjusted for age and gender. Additionally, a linear regression analysis (Toprak & Kalkan, 2023) was performed to understand and predict the dependency relationship between attitude towards disability in relation to the variables of feeling comfortable, the reason for contacting people with disabilities, and feeling well-informed or poorly informed. Statistical significance was set at a p-value of less than 0.05.

FINDINGS

The t-test shows significant differences in two of the three dimensions (SR, IP and general attitude towards disability) between students over and under 27 years of age ($p>0.05$). Students over 27 have a more positive general attitude towards disability and can establish better social relations and generate intervention programs.

Table 3
Equal-means t-test for variable age

Dependent Variable	Age	Mean (<i>DT</i>)	Levene's test for equality of variances		Levene's T-test for equality of means of Cohen's	
			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Social Relations (SR)	<27 years	3,24 (0,30)	1,165	0,281	-1,980	0,049*
	>27 years	3,32 (0,33)				
Normalised live (NL)	<27 years	3,61 (0,28)	0,002	0,966	-0,960	0,338
	>27 years	3,65 (0,29)				
Intervention Programmes (IP)	<27 years	3,49 (0,38)	0,010	0,921	-2,452	0,015*
	>27 years	3,61 (0,39)				
General attitude towards disability (GAD)	<27 years	3,55 (0,26)	0,323	0,570	-2,059	0,041*
	>27 years	3,63 (0,28)				

Note: **p* < 0,05.

The t-test shows significant differences in terms of establishing social relationships between students who do and do not have contact with family members with disabilities.

Table 4
Equal-means t-test for the variable contact ratio with people with disabilities

Dependent variable	Contact	Mean (<i>DT</i>)	Levene's test for equality of variances		Levene's T-test for equality of means of Cohen's	
			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Social Relations (SR)	Family	3,24 (0,28)	1,409	0,238	-2,069	0,041*
	Non- family	3,35 (0,26)				
Normalised live (NL)	Family	3,64 (0,23)	1,245	0,267	-0,331	0,742
	Non- family	3,65 (0,30)				
Intervention Programmes (IP)	Family	3,60 (0,31)	2,344	0,129	1,025	0,308
	Non- family	3,51 (0,44)				
General attitude towards disability (GAD)	Family	3,58 (0,21)	0,351	0,555	-0,955	0,342
	Non- family	3,63 (0,26)				

Note: **p* < 0,05.

The variable of being well or poorly informed is significant in establishing social relationships (t-test). No significant differences were found in terms of normalized life, intervention programs or general attitude towards disability.

Table 5
Equal-means t-test for the variable perceived level of information about disability

Dependent Variable	Perceived level of information about disability	Mean (DT)	Levene's test for equality of variances		Levene's T-test for equality of means of Cohen's	
			F	p	t	p
Social Relations (SR)	Well informed	3,22 (0,32)	0,546	0,461	-2,872	0,004** 0,31
	Poorly informed	3,34 (0,30)				
Normalized live (NL)	Well informed	3,60 (0,30)	0,387	0,534	-1,373	0,171 0,28
	Poorly informed	3,65 (0,27)				
Intervention Programs (IP)	Well informed	3,55 (0,37)	0,074	0,785	0,357	0,721 0,39
	Poorly informed	3,53 (0,41)				
General attitude towards disability (GAD)	Well informed	3,55 (0,27)	0,311	0,577	-1,906	0,058 0,27
	Poorly informed	3,62 (0,26)				

Note: **p < 0,01.

The T-test shows no significant differences in terms of gender or the type of contact with people with disabilities.

However, ANOVA shows significant differences in the perception of being comfortable with people with disabilities across the dimensions of social relations, normalized life and general attitude.

Table 6

Analysis of Variance. Dimension of Social Relationships *Comfort Level with People with Disabilities

Comfort Level	M	DT	Levene's test		ANOVA		Post-Hoc (Tukey)
			F (gl1,gl2)	p	F (gl1,gl2)	p	
Indifferent	3,18	0,31					
Quite comfortable	3,24	0,29	0,532	0,588	11,931	0,000	Very comfortable>Indifferent
Very comfortable	3,41	0,29	(2,240)		(2,240)		Very comfortable<Quite comfortable

Table 7

Analysis of Variance. Dimension of Normalise lived *Comfort Level with People with Disabilities

Comfort Level	M	DT	Levene's test		ANOVA		Post-Hoc (Tukey)
			F (gl1,gl2)	p	F (gl1,gl2)	p	
Indifferent	3,55	0,32					
Quite comfortable	3,59	0,30	4,086	0,018	7,762	0,001	Very comfortable>Indifferent
Very comfortable	3,72	0,23	(2,240)		(2,240)		Very comfortable<Quite comfortable

Table 8

Analysis of Variance. Dimension of General attitude towards disability *Comfort Level with People with Disabilities

Comfort Level	M	DT	Prueba de Levene		ANOVA		Post-Hoc (Tukey)
			F (gl1,gl2)	p	F (gl1,gl2)	p	
Indifferent	3,50	0,27					
Quite comfortable	3,55	0,26	1,009	0,366	12,144	0,000	Very comfortable>Indifferent
Very comfortable	3,69	0,24	(2,240)		(2,240)		Very comfortable<Quite comfortable

No significant differences were found in the dimensions of intervention programs or in the reasons for contact. The Pearson r test was performed on the study variables RS, VN and PI, as well as general attitude towards disability (AGD), feelings of comfort and being informed, and the reason for contact. Model I showed that higher comfort scores around people with disabilities correlated with higher scores in social relationships, normal living and carrying out intervention programs, and a more proactive attitude towards disability ($p < 0.01$ for all). However, these differences were not found in Model II when adjusting for gender and age. The variable 'contact reason' showed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) with the variable 'social relationships' (Model I), regardless of

gender and age. The variable 'being informed' showed highly significant differences ($p < 0.01$) with the variable 'social relationships' (Model I), regardless of gender and age.

Table 9

Correlations between Attitude towards disability and * Comfort Level with People with Disabilities, *Contact, *Well informed

Comfort	Contact		Well informed	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
SR	0,353**	0,347	0,209*	0,090
NL	0,241**	0,242	0,034	-0,003
IP	0,190**	0,177	-0,105	-0,235 (0,390)
GAD	0,339**	0,334	0,098	-0,009
				0,120
				0,112

Note: Model I (in crude). Model II (adjusted for sex and age). *Value $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Finally, a linear regression was performed (Table 9) to carry out a predictive analysis of the general attitude towards disability, considering feelings of comfort, reasons for contact and feelings of being well/informally informed. The general attitude model towards people with disabilities yielded R^2 values of 0.173 and a Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.965. ANOVA showed F-values of 6.408 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that feelings of comfort, the reason for contact and being well-informed are significant variables in predicting a positive attitude towards disability. However, feeling comfortable ($\beta = 0.091$; $t = 3.157$; $p = 0.002$) significantly ($p < 0.001$) predicts a proactive attitude towards disability. It is important to note that no significant association was found between the reason for contact and being well-informed, regardless of age and gender.

Table 10

Lineal Regression Attitude towards disability and * Comfort Level with People with Disabilities, *Contact, *Well informed

Comfort	Contact				Well informed							
	β	EE	t	p	β	EE	t	p				
GAD	0,091	0,029	3,157	0,002	0,101	0,049	2,068	0,41	0,055	0,047	1,166	0,247

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to analyze the relationship between future teachers' attitudes towards disability at MUFPS, specifically in terms of comfort level, reasons for contact, and perceived level of information. It sought to foster social relationships, normalization, and targeted actions aligned with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, promoting inclusive teaching practices as a model of change in professional development.

The main findings indicate that proactive attitudes towards disability, cultivated through targeted training, have the potential to transform educational practice. Such attitudes are characterized by comfort in interacting with individuals with disabilities and a perception of being well-informed. A sense of comfort may reflect both knowledge and confidence regarding disability, facilitating social interactions, normalization, and

equitable practices. Conversely, a lack of knowledge or experience with people with disabilities can contribute to insecurity and unconscious discriminatory behaviors, including indifference, prejudice, and overprotection (Rello, Garoz & Díaz, 2014).

Consistent with prior research, future teachers with favorable attitudes towards disability are more likely to establish meaningful interactions, feel comfortable in these interactions, and support the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate fully in society (Echeita et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of experiential learning, which fosters reciprocal and meaningful engagement that enriches both teaching and social development (Del Valle & Rodríguez, 2017; Santos, 2022). Such experiences are essential for the implementation of inclusive education and are most effective within a democratic educational framework (Laval & Sorondo, 2022).

Interestingly, the study found that mere contact with individuals with disabilities does not reliably predict a positive attitude. While contact can improve social relationships, it does not necessarily promote normalized participation or the development of fundamental intervention programs in teaching practice (Macías, 2021). Similarly, incomplete or poorly structured information about disability does not predict proactive attitudes, highlighting the need for targeted, contextually relevant knowledge to effect meaningful societal and educational change (Corral, 2019; Lacoboni & Moirano, 2018).

Age showed a tendency for individuals over 27 to exhibit more positive attitudes, better social interactions, and greater willingness to develop intervention programs. However, age was not a statistically significant predictor in inferential analyses, suggesting that positive attitudes can be cultivated regardless of age (Bermúdez & Navarrete, 2020). Likewise, no significant gender differences were observed (Navarro-Patón, Pereira & Rodriguez-Fernández, 2020).

These findings have practical implications for teacher training programs. To promote inclusive education, curricula should integrate strategies that foster comfort and proactive engagement with disability, thereby enhancing attitudinal dispositions necessary for implementing UDL effectively (Shoji et al., 2016; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Successful UDL implementation requires not only a solid knowledge base and practical skills but also attitudinal and motivational readiness to adapt learning environments to diverse needs (De Coninck et al., 2020; Guerriero, 2017).

Evaluating attitudes towards disability during and after teacher training enables the identification of areas requiring targeted interventions. Evidence-based assessment can guide the design of strategies that are realistic and applicable, ensuring that professional development efforts contribute to transformative societal outcomes (Laval & Sorondo, 2022; Roguero-García & Santos, 2022).

In conclusion, attitudes of MUFPS students towards disability are strongly associated with their comfort regarding the reason for contact and perceived level of information, regardless of age or gender. Positive feelings and comfort are crucial for fostering receptive attitudes and driving meaningful changes in teacher professional development. Integrating UDL principles, emphasizing complementarity, and promoting inclusive

coexistence are central to democratic education. These findings can inform university training programs, educational administration, teacher development initiatives, and the work of school leadership, teachers, and families, ultimately enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and supporting the construction of a more inclusive and democratic society.

Despite these insights, the study has limitations. The reliance on self-reported attitudes may introduce bias, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Future research could employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine how UDL-based training interventions influence attitudes and inclusive practices over time. Moreover, a deeper integration of UDL principles in both curriculum and teacher reflection processes could provide stronger evidence for specific instructional strategies that promote equity, accessibility, and engagement across diverse student populations.

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